

Imagined Communities by Benedict Anderson

Reviewed by Pete Sweeney for SIS500 Professor Guy

My first and best real job was working at a refugee resettlement agency in Atlanta, Georgia. By the time clients reached us, every other aspect of human society above their immediate family (and sometimes even that) had failed them. Their local communities, their larger ethnic affiliations, their governments, and the transnational entities that were all pledged to protect them from violence had either actively or passively participated in driving them from their homes, their communities, and their nations, and depositing them in Hartsfield International Airport, from whence they were delivered to poor neighborhoods in South Atlanta, and advised welcome to modern capitalism, root or die.

In studying the causes of their arrival at our door, the most frequently blamed “ism” was “nationalism.” Yes, there were confessional aspects to the Bosnian conflict. The situation in Somalia, on the other hand, could be described as tribalism fighting over the right to masquerade as a nation before the international community, and to reserve the rights and privileges of sovereignty to themselves. Nevertheless, as a former internationalist Catholic, I was raised to believe in cosmopolitan internationalism, and my drift towards secularism and the left only served to reinforce this.

Therefore the context in which I read Benedict Anderson’s discussion of nationalism is qualified by what may well be a knee-jerk reaction to the term. In *Imagined Communities*, Anderson casts a sympathetic eye on nationalism, specifically targeting the “certain condescension of “cosmopolitan and polylingual intellectuals” who disdain both the historical record of nationalism and its “philosophical poverty.” Anderson does admit some basis to their condescension, however, when he notes that “unlike most other ‘isms’, nationalism has never produced its own grand thinkers.” Nevertheless he uses an interesting case as an introduction to the problem; why did allegedly internationalist, ideologically consistent communist regimes go to war with each other in Southeast Asia? How was nationalism able to trump the Internationale?

First, however, Anderson must set out to describe what nationalism is. For starters, he admits nationalism is not rooted in objective surveys of history, but rather in invention and myth. He asserts that many historians and academics inclined towards materialist evaluations of history have difficulty taking myth as something more than fraud, invention as more than fabrication. But

Anderson takes a Romantic view of the imagination's power to create; if one can imagine a community, ultimately a national community, that community is no less real, and the imagined version of it no less legitimate, than something based on objective historical analysis, which has not proved capable of mobilization. So if one concedes that mobilization of a society for the purposes of defense is necessary, one must admit the necessity for national myths. Anderson does not specify defense as a justification, but he does take several moments to defend the ability of the nation to mobilize people for "love," specifically expressed in national art. Love of country, to his mind, does not necessarily imply hatred of another country. However, Anderson also seems impressed by people's "willingness to die" for their nation-states, and he uses some odd metrics to support it. By noting that more people died in World War I than actively killed in World War II, he seems to posit an national altruistic motive that may or may not have been shared by those who had no choice whether to die or not. Certainly the civilian victims of "total war" bombing campaigns did not . . . and I am leery of this logic as it seems to justify the concept of total war.

Anderson also asserts that evolutionary or progressive history (specifically Marxist history) has difficult discussing individual mortality or granting it a place of significance. Whereas the religion, the divine dynasty, and the historical cosmology offer significance to the individual life in service of a divine project. Anderson then claims that "the slow, interlinked decline of these interlinked certainties" in the absolute truth and continuity of faith, king, and cosmos exposed a niche in human social needs into which nationalism was poured. If there is no paradise, one can live on in the life of the nation, which is both rooted in the past and an ever-present permanence. So on the one hand, Anderson does allow for a degree of continuity, of evolution, from the pre-national to the national. On the other, he posits a degree of timelessness to the concept of the nation, if not the reality of it.

On the other, Anderson also posits a radical change in human consciousness (mostly European consciousness) that provoked nationalism. The same forces that caused the decline of Church, King, and Cosmos caused an upsurge in nationalist sentiment and organization. Those forces were economic change caused by the industrial revolution, scientific and social discoveries; the former exemplified by the printing press, the latter by the exploration of Marco Polo which revealed vast continents of non-Christian, non-Europeans that established a border for Europe and Christianity where before there was none. And his third cause is derived from the second: the diffusion of rapid communications devices, especially newspapers and "vernacular" books.

Anderson's discussion of the decline of sacred languages and the "vernacularization" of the printed word is fascinating and instructive. He notes that the market for elite languages like Latin was quickly saturated. The literate bourgeoisie, on the other hand, presented a much larger demand for works in their native language ("an illiterate bourgeoisie is scarcely imaginable," he says). All of this was originally caused by the massive production of the printed Bible, but reached its modern incarnation with the Reformation and its associated propaganda wars, in which Luther's works, written in vernacular German, formed one third of the total published product in Germany for some seven years.

The creation of a popular imagination of the nation involved a manipulation of memory in which some things are "remembered" (accurately or not) while other things are quite deliberately forgotten or rewritten. For example, Anderson discusses how wars between peoples with little in common from an objective historical perspective are re-written into "reassuring" fratricidal conflicts- turning war into civil war. Tragic, yes, but tragic within a family metaphor. Anderson also discusses the utility of the "awakening" trope deployed to such great effect in much of the non-creole colonies (as described in China by John Fitzgerald), which painted images of nations that existed in reality but had yet to be perceived by "sleeping" peoples. Thus China had always existed, descending from the Yellow Emperor, but her citizens had forgotten her. This trope both provided an intellectual basis for nationalism and also a justification for rule by an "awakened" elite to the exclusion of the sleeping masses.

These developments, these changes of metaphor, these holes in the imaginative fabric of the era provided a vacuum for nationalism to enter and provided it with the structural and technological tools to disseminate itself. Most importantly, print allowed persons to identify with the experiences of people they were not related to. Print, particularly newspapers, created a new historical space containing simultaneous actions and a story line which unified its readership in different towns. The readership unified around the vernacular language and around the concept that Prasenjit Duara calls "discent," which means more or less identifying yourself in terms of who you are not. By enlarging the human view of the world, humans were forced to more closely define the borders both physical and cultural that separated them from people in Mali, in France, in China.

So what kinds of nationalisms were formed? Anderson allows for several: creole (i.e. American) nationalism, linguistic nationalism, official/dynastic nationalism, and post-colonial (i.e. African, Asian, and Swiss!) nationalism. In Anderson's view, all of these nationalisms were largely provoked

by developments in Europe related to secularization and industrialization. Since his argument requires print capitalism and print technology to produce these new imagined communities, nationalism cannot develop in countries without these technologies. This is how he explains the low *intensity* of the nationalism that formed in Latin America, for example.

While creole nationalism is placed first in the book, for chronological reasons, it is best to discuss the book in terms of its analysis of Europe. The creole colonizers were ethnic Europeans placed in the Americas. There was therefore little racist reason to exclude them from power- this is a point Anderson returns to, that Nationalism and racism are not synonymous in cause or effect. And yet the European powers did restrict colonial administrators both vertically and laterally, regardless of race. For example, not only did Britain not promote Indians to positions in Britain, or very high in their own colonial administration, but it did not transfer them laterally either (except, I'd point out, in the form of military units). This would seem clear racism until Anderson points out that the British did the same to white British citizens in the Americas, Australia, and New Zealand.

However, a class of creole colonial administrators existed, sometimes bilingual but always speaking at least the mother tongue, and generally trained in the mother country. And yet these persons were circumscribed by exclusive policy. According to Anderson, this provoked two reactions. First, if a creole administrator could not be a "pure" Englishman or Spaniard by definition, neither could an Englishman or Spaniard be a true . . . what? Creole nationalism answered the "what?" Since Washington could not hope to advance as an English general, he must perforce convert his colonial militia into an "American" army. This leads to the second reaction, which I might call "promotional nationalism"; for purely ambitious reasons, it was in the interests of these administrators to redefine the summit of their careers by redefining the capital city. Rather than be a small, immobilized fish in a giant imperial pond, why not shrink the pond? Thus Anderson explains the proliferation of "New" colonial cities like New York, New Amsterdam and so on in terms of a nationalistic re-centering.

In Europe proper, nationalist was a deeper and more populist affair. Where the colonial administrators were a numerically small class (Anderson notes the relatively low literacy rates and the deeper racial divides in the Americas as inhibiting the deepening of national sentiment), the nationalism of Europe was rooted in language distinctions between geographic areas and between rulers and ruled. Anderson makes an important caveat, however, when he notes that the creation of state languages did not constitute evidence of national sentiment but rather of its opposite; making

German the language of the Hapsburg state diluted German nationalism by empowering it in a cosmopolitan context. Other linguistic nationalisms, such as the Magyar nationalism, did so *in opposition* to the imposition of a state language (and also in repression of minority languages from peoples they considered lacking in “historical personality”).

Following this form of nationalism came official or dynastic nationalism, which Anderson believes was largely an attempt to co-opt populist, groundswell (or more accurately, bourgeoisie-swell) nationalism to serve the interest of existing aristocratic and imperial power structures. Anderson, who engage the reader with a frequently clever use of metaphor, describes this strategy as “stretching the short, tight skin of the nation over the gigantic body of the empire.” This attempt, to Anderson’s view, was paradoxical and had contradictory effects. It was easily “pirated” by nationalists less inclined to support aristocracies speaking foreign languages or conducting their affairs according to principles of *hausmacht*. “The nation proved an invention,” writes Anderson, “on which it was impossible to secure a patent.”

The final form of nationalism consists largely of leftovers of the other kinds. Post-colonial nationalism in Asia and Africa followed the development and entrenchment of nationalism in Europe and the creole colonies. Thus what is true for creole administrators was doubly true for Indian administrators. While Anderson first paints this phenomenon as an attempt by the colonized to imitate European official nationalism, in his revision to the chapter he changes his mind and decides it was a more unique phenomenon informed profoundly by the colonial experience, specifically the “classificatory grid” created by colonial censuses, maps, and museums, which established boundaries and limits and definitions for peoples, places, and histories that only made sense in the context of a national identity.

He also takes some time to qualify his description of how radical revolutions managed to retain the trappings (and too frequently the bureaucracies and institutional problems) of dynastic (or colonial) nationalism, pointing out how odd it is that the Communists retained the Kremlin as a governing center while the Chinese communists moved into the Forbidden City: “even the most determinedly radical revolutionaries always, to some degree, inherit the state from the fallen regime. Some of these legacies are symbolic, but not the less important for that . . . The more the ancient dynastic state is naturalized, the more its antique finery can be wrapped around revolutionary shoulders.”

The book, to my mind, has some weaknesses. First, his attempt to differentiate nationalism from racism is worthwhile but confused. He simply doesn’t allot enough space to make his case, and the

chapter feels rushed. For example, he says that racism denies nation, that terms like “slant” are used to place people outside of history. This is a very complex issue involving identity and its roots in religion, race, and nation; on the one hand I am inclined to consider arguing over whether the Rwandan genocide was racism or nationalism to be somewhat beside the point, on the other, the term racism is so loosely applied these days that it threatens to become meaningless, so I appreciate attempts to describe its circumference. However, Anderson fails to do this, in my opinion. Second, like most authors who posit radical dividing lines in human history informed by changes in consciousness, he is challenged to support his thesis objectively. Prasenjit Duara, for example, takes exception with the singular privilege Anderson allots to print capitalism as the key to the formation of imagined communities. Duara believes that the Chinese imagined community predated print capitalism, supported by bonds of oral tradition and religious affiliation. Indeed Anderson himself seems to allow for a continuity from religious community to national community, and one wonders whether making the distinction between the one and the other really requires some sort of paradigmatic change in human imagination to be useful.

Overall, the book seems like a useful reaction to those inclined to dismiss nationalism (and religion) as a pack of lies. Depending on your philosophical orientation, these lies are either necessary or poisonous, but either way if you take this view you must necessarily take a condescending attitude towards the ability of people to govern themselves. If there is nothing “real” about the imagined community, be it religious or national, and yet this false imagination is the only tool available for rallying the masses, then the responsibility falls on the shoulders of the educated secular elites to actively mislead the people using mumbo jumbo so that they go in the right direction. One is reminded of Robespierre’s attempt to organize the peasants around a “Goddess of Reason,” of the communist cults of personality, and of course of recent American political phenomena.

However, the reaction is a bit loose for my taste. It explains some modern events but not all; Anderson is singularly silent on what distinguishes Asia from Africa, and he does not touch on modern tribalism’s intersection with nationalism, an enormous omission to my mind. Otherwise the history is excellent and the writing entertaining. His discussion of creole nationalism is singularly important, to my view, since I had never even seen the issue considered in post-colonial criticism (not that it hasn’t been discussed, just that I personally have not read it). In short, the work provides a good basis for proceeding forwards, and the number of references I see to this work in other works on nationalism speaks to its impact.